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ABSTRACT

The process of education will be fully understood only by studying it as a process, as a few anthropologists and sociologists have begun to do. The problems of inner city education need more such studies, especially longitudinal investigations of the processes by which exceptional teachers and schools succeed in the education of impoverished youth. It may be that the lives of education researchers have been too remote from the schools. Perhaps their direct involvement in the processes with which teachers and administrators are preoccupied would lead them to undertake more studies that afford clear guidance for educational practice. It is understandable that researchers like analytical studies of the relations among isolated variables that we know well how to measure. The data tend to be objective, and they fit neatly into regression equations or are subject to analysis of variance. These are methodological values that can seldom be realized in studies addressed to complex situations with a multitude of uncontrolled variables. But the process of education involves precisely such situations; and it may be that less refined, partly subjective techniques of investigation can yield insights now unattainable through statistical analysis. (Author/JM)

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HOW TO MAKE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH RELEVANT TO THE URBAN COMMUNITY*

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There is general agreement in the profession on the premise underlying this symposium -- that our continuing vast output of educational research seems to have minimal relevance to educational practice. Certainly its observable impact upon the process of education in our schools is meager, not only in the urban community but in the profession at large.

Responsibility for this hiatus is commonly attributed to researchers. It is said that they are preoccupied with abstruse questions beyond the ken of most practitioners, that they do not know and are unconcerned about the real problems one meets in the classroom, and that their reports are addressed to other researchers, not to teachers and administrato who man the "points of production" in the educational enterprise. There is considerable validity to all of these indictments, and it is with them that this analysis is mainly concerned.

It should be noted, however, that this is not the whole picture. The school, like all social institutions, is inherently conservative. Inertia prevails. Research findings that are clearly relevant but that call for innovation are often perceived as threats by both school

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personnel and the community. Moreover, most school teachers and administrators would not know if research reports relevant to their work should appear; they do not read the journals.

Thus, how to make the school more responsive to relevant findings of educational research is also an important problem. But that is not the question before this panel.

What can researchers do to help close the gap between the systematic study of education and the practice of education, especially in the urban community? I think much of the answer lies in both substantive and methodological shifts in the emphases of educational research.

On the Substance of Research

One needed shift of emphasis as regards the types of research problems attacked is from preoccupation with the short-comings of the inner-city child to increased concern over the dysfunctional characteristics of the inner-city school.

Since we discovered the "culturally deprived" (or "disadvantaged") child about a decade ago, a great deal of research on urban education has been addressed to defining and documenting the many "deficits" said to be characteristic of children of the poor, the limitations on their development -- and, indeed, on their "potential" -- presumably resulting from primary socialization under conditions of poverty and discrimination. The main impact of such studies has been to strengthen the negative

stereotypes of poor children already prevalent among professional staffs, to relieve them of responsibility for the very high incidence of academic failure among such children, and thus to legitimatize the prevailing malfunctioning of ghetto schools.

There is considerable theoretical and empirical evidence that children of the poor can and do learn effectively when guided in appropriate learning experiences, and studies based on this premise would ask different questions from those preoccupied with listing children's "deficits." They would seek to identify structural arrangements and procedures in the school that serve as obstacles to effective learning by inner-city children. Illustrative is Leacock's systematic analysis of the instructional process in selected second-grade and fifth-grade classrooms in four schools of varying social-class and racial composition.[1] Illustrative also is Rist's longitudinal study of the classroom experience of one group of black children from kindergarten to second grade in one school.[2] There are very few such systematic studies addressed to the nature of the learning experiences that prevail in the classrooms of ghetto schools, and I know of none that seeks to interpret the impact upon children's development of over-all school structure and prevailing patterns of educational leadership in the inner-city.

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[1]Eleanor Burke Leacock, Teaching and Learning in City Schools, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969.

[2]Roy C. Rist," Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education," Harvard Educational Review: 40: 411-451, August 1970.

Studies based on the premise that children of the poor are educable would also seek to determine why it is that some of them do learn effectively in school, and why some teachers and some schools in almost any large city are notably effective in promoting such learning. I know of only one substantial study of severely underprivileged children who do achieve satisfactorily in school -- Davidson and Greenberg's investigation of selected fifth-graders in Central Harlem.[3] And I know of no substantial study of those teachers who manage consistently to guide impoverished pupils to effective learning, or of those few ghetto schools that tend to excel in this effort.

It is probable that much-needed insights into crucial problems of urban education would emerge if students of inner-city education would shift their emphasis from the pathology of the ghetto to the failures and successes of teachers and schools serving children of the poor.

Another shift of research emphasis that would be helpful to inner-city education is from the study of narrow bits of questions to the study of larger questions perceived as problems by practitioners in the schools.

As Lawrence Frank pointed out long ago, scientific research -- and educational research is no exception -- "has been geared to an analytic tradition; to study any situation or event we must analyze it into its various components and investigate the relation between pairs of variables in an adequate sample."[4]

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[3]Helen H. Davidson and Judith W. Greenberg, School Achievers from a Deprived Background. New York: The City College of the City University of New York, 1967.

[4]Lawrence K. Frank, "Research for What?" Journal of Social Issues. Supplement No. 10, 1957, p. 8.

Inspection of the program for this meeting of educational researchers reveals the extent to which this is true. Problems of measurement abound, as do analyses of innumerable "isolated" variables and models for this and that. Most of them appear to be valid research problems, and they do have relevance to the process of education. But they are a far cry from the kinds of problems posed by the people who man the schools especially in the inner-city.

Thoughtful teachers and administrators in urban schools tend to ask such questions as these: What is really important for children to learn? What learning activities and materials are most helpful for teaching this or that? How keep a class of 25 or 30 pupils busy at profitable learning tasks? How minimize management problems in the classroom? What are pupils actually learning (as opposed to their relative levels of performance)? What relations are optimal between administrators and teachers between school and community? But these kinds of questions cannot be answered by research concerned with narrow analytical problems abstracted from the total school or classroom situation.

Education in the inner-city school, as in all schools, is a multi-faceted process of social interaction. Involved are children with varying abilities and motivations; teachers and other professionals with differing competencies, purposes and perceptions of role; and parents with varying insights and motivations and statuses in the community. All are participants in an integral system of behaviors centered around social values and educational objectives, involving classroom and other experiences

structured along well-defined lines, and conditioned by such influences as space, educational materials, school organization, and the social and political system beyond the school.

If research is to provide effective guidance for this complex system of interactions, it will have to give increased emphasis to the study of total situations and organized wholes, with all of their manifold variables.

Again to quote Frank:

> Let us consider what we may again if we focus on problems of organized complexity in our social research, especially when undertaken for practical use. We would cease fractioning such wholes into a series of variables to be studied seriatim as in most of our present studies. . . . As we are increasingly realizing, we need, not hypotheses about the relation of two variables or suspected causal relations (appropriate for analytic studies), but rather some conceptual models which are not explorations or generalizations, but scientific approaches.[5]

Such an approach would entail a major shift in the emphases of educational research, but it could be expected to yield data and inferences more useful to teachers and administrators than the types of studies that now prevail.

The propensity of researchers to select problems different from those posed by practitioners reminds me of a recent column by Russel Baker, complaining that the people who make electric dishwashers never wash dishes; if they did, they would develop better products. Baker goes on to generalize: "The trouble with America today is that people who have

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[5] Op. cit., p. 10.

the power to make things happen don't live like people do, so don't know what needs to be made to happen."[6]

It may be that the lives of educational researchers are too remote from the schools. Perhaps their direct involvement in the processes with which teachers and administrators are preoccupied would lead them to undertake more studies that afford clear guidance for educational practice.

On Research Methodology

It is understandable that researchers like analytical studies of the relations among isolated variables that we know well how to measure. The data tend to be objective, and they fit neatly into regression equations or are subject to analysis of variance. These are methodological values that can seldom be realized in studies addressed to complex situations with a multitude of uncontrolled variables. But the process of education involves precisely such situations; and, given the present state of the art, it may be that less refined, partly subjective techniques of investigation can yield insights now unattainable through statistical analysis.

I am impressed with the added dimensions of understanding of educational phenomena that come from studies using some of the more qualitative methods of anthropology and sociology. The Leacock and Rist studies noted previously, both involving systematic classroom observations, illuminate in a way no statistical investigation could

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[6] "Observer", The New York Times, January 28, 1971.

the processes by which some inner-city children are educated while their classmates are not. Similarly, Fuchs' analysis of tapes recorded over a period of months by beginning teachers, describing and interpreting their week-to-week experiences on the job, lays bare as no previous study has done the process by which enthusiastic, self-critical new teachers are socialized into the patterns of non-expectation and complacency that tend to prevail in ghetto schools.[7]

I know of no way fully to understand the process of education other than by studying it as a process; and that is what Leacock, Rist, Fuchs and a few others -- anthropologists and sociologists -- are beginning to do. The problems of inner-city education need more such studies, especially longitudinal investigations of the processes by which exceptional teachers and schools succeed in the education of impoverished youth.

Process studies, of course, lack the apparent precision and objectivity of statistical analyses; but educational researchers -- and the profession -- are likely to find compensating rewards in the deeper insights and enhanced relevance that systematic studies of the complex whole can yield.

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[7]Estelle Fuchs, Teachers Talk. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co. (Anchor Book), 1969.